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ABSTRACT

This paper informs researchers about a "National Research Agenda" that will be presented to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education to develop guidelines for coordinating and funding future research initiatives in the postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students. The paper also solicits feedback from readers of the "Agenda" and aims to expand cross-disciplinary networking among professionals who might collaborate on applied research projects resulting from the Agenda. The federal government has had a long-standing role in funding postsecondary education for deaf students but has never developed a cohesive policy for supporting postsecondary education for these students. The need for a model theoretical framework to link future research studies has been recognized. Key unifying principles underlying the framework include: (1) a focus on outcomes; (2) common definitions of the target student populations; (3) linkages to established national goals for educating these students; (4) consistencies in data collection across different studies; and (5) integrating and coordinating these studies to ensure that their research objectives reinforce each other. The conceptual framework comprises student populations, on-campus support services and accommodations, and postsecondary living and learning environments. Effects of each of these research areas are related to programmatic outcomes that mirror national objectives in the postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students. Some of the steps in the development of the research "Agenda" are outlined. (SLD)

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A *National Research Agenda* for the Postsecondary Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

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Objectives:

- Inform interested researchers in AERA about a *National Research Agenda* that will be presented to the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in the U.S. Department of Education (USDED) to develop guidelines for coordinating and funding future research initiatives in the postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students.

- Solicit feedback from readers of the *Agenda* and expand cross-disciplinary networking among professionals who could potentially collaborate on applied research projects expected to result from this *Agenda*.

Perspectives: Passage of the Government Performance and Results Act in 1993 mandated that federal agencies determine programmatic outcomes and information systems to adjust spending priorities to comply with agency goals. Ever since the founding of Gallaudet College in 1864, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology (NTID/RIT) in 1966, and four regional training programs in 1968, the federal government has had a long-standing role in funding postsecondary education for deaf students. However, USDED has never developed a cohesive policy for supporting postsecondary education for these students.

The federal role has changed over time. In 1996 the focus of the regional education programs was shifted from directly serving deaf students to providing technical assistance and outreach services to colleges and universities to enhance access and services to their deaf and hard of hearing students. Subsequently, the Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) was formed to coordinate the activities of four regional Technical Assistance Centers (TACs). These four TACs and their respective service regions are: NTID/RIT (Northeast), the University of Tennessee Postsecondary Education Consortium (South), St. Paul (MN) Technical College (Midwest), and California State University at Northridge (West). Outreach activities to postsecondary institutions vary from region to region. In the Northeast and South most of the states have an outreach program affiliated with their respective regional TAC. Generally in the Midwest and West sub-regional centers serving a cluster of states are affiliated with their respective regional TAC.

Watson and Schroedel (2000) observed other major changes since the 1970s in the postsecondary education of students with hearing loss:

- A decrease in the number of programs exclusively serving deaf students and a corresponding increase in programs serving students with hearing loss through a generic on-campus office serving students with various disabilities or similar programs at 1,000 campuses in 1997.
- The number of specially designated colleges serving deaf students (N=150) remained stable between 1987 and 1998 while the number of such students they served decreased from 7,000 in 1987 to 5,200 in 1998 (Rawlings, Karchmer, & DeCaro, 1988; Rawlings, Karchmer, DeCaro, & Allen, 1999).
- An apparent increase in the number of deaf and hard of hearing students served at colleges and universities without service programs of any kind.

These authors noted that these trends reflected four underlying patterns:

- The post-rubella bubble decrease in the number of deaf students eligible for college training.
- Increased attention by college professionals to hard of hearing and late-deafened students.
- The consequences of increased K-12 mainstreaming of deaf students since 1970.
- The changed role in the federally funded regional centers since 1996.

One result of these trends has been the emergence of a continuum of academic and non-academic postsecondary settings for students with hearing loss: (a) Gallaudet and NTID/RIT, (b) two-year and four-year colleges and universities, (c) community-based employment training centers, (d) for-profit business colleges and trade schools, and (e) other postsecondary vocational training programs in the 50 states.

Developing USDED goals for the postsecondary education of deaf and hard of hearing students has been hampered by conditions such as the lack of a well-organized research program. These conditions have created problems for USDED in planning research, determining programmatic outcomes, and setting agency goals for federal initiatives in the postsecondary education of these students. Some examples:

- National studies with various definitions of deaf and hard of hearing students reported significant discrepancies in estimates of the number of these students. One federal survey estimated that there were 258,000 such students enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities in 1989-1990 (USDED, 1993). Watson and Schroedel (2000) calculated that 197,000 of these students were hard of hearing, 52,000 deafened at or after age 19, and 9,000 deafened before age 19. By contrast, two other national surveys estimated that there were only 20,000 such students enrolled in 1993 and 1997 (Hopkins & Walter, 1999; Lewis & Farris, 1994).
- The Congressional reauthorization of the Education of the Deaf Act in 1998 mandated national studies on these students, but did not appropriate the funding.

The mixed legacy from research on the postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students during the past 30 years has added to this dilemma. This includes a severe shortage of studies evaluating the outcomes of this training and factors contributing to these outcomes. Fisher, Harlow, and Moores (1974) did an in-depth analysis of three regional training programs which resulted in the relocation of one of these centers. Schroedel and Watson (1991) reported on the management, staffing, student characteristics, their use of available support services, and alumni outcomes from a national sample of 46 special-designated programs. These authors noted major problems at these programs including: (a) a high rate of student attrition, (b) under-participation of students from ethnic minority backgrounds, (c) relative inattention to hard of hearing students, and (d) a lack of national standards on the quality of support services. Balancing this situation has been the completion of numerous studies at specific campuses, including Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, assessing various support services, methods of classroom learning, and alumni outcomes.

A Conceptual Framework: The above-noted conditions have expedited the need to establish a

model theoretical framework to more effectively link future research studies. As specified in the set of graphics accompanying this paper and in the *National Research Agenda* report, key unifying principles underlying this framework include: (a) a focus on outcomes, (b) common definitions of the target student populations, (c) linkages to established national goals for educating these students, (d) consistencies in data collection across different studies, and (e) integrating and coordinating these studies to ensure that their research objectives mutually reinforce each other.

This conceptual framework comprises three primary inter-related research areas: (a) student populations, (b) on-campus support services and accommodations, and (c) postsecondary living and learning environments. Effects of each of these research areas are related to programmatic outcomes that mirror national objectives in the postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students. Such objectives may include: (a) improving graduation rates, (b) diversifying enrollments, (c) enriching student language skills, and (d) strengthening graduates' job readiness. This basic schemata reflects the complex interaction of differences in student characteristics, provision of services, and student living and learning environments found in the nationwide continuum of postsecondary programs for these students.

The *Agenda* report also identified several other key precepts interwoven into this framework:

- Future research studies generated through this framework must follow national goals for postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students set by USDED, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Social Security Administration. Recent federal legislation, such as the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the Ticket to Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, requires national inter-agency cooperation to enhance workforce development and reduce dependency on public assistance.
- Researchers must draw upon completed studies in planning new projects. These include the PEPNet national needs assessment (Hopkins & Walter, 1999), the Gallaudet/NTID surveys for the *College and Career Programs for Deaf Students* (e.g., Rawlings, et al., 1999), and the national forum on the education of deaf and hard of hearing children and youth (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1999).
- Researchers must utilize existing national databases such as the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Longitudinal Study on Transition, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data (IPED), and the Rehabilitation Services Administration RSA-911 data system.

Methods:

The *National Research Agenda* originated in 1999 as a joint endeavor sponsored by the four regional TACs under the auspices of PEPNet. The TAC at the University of Tennessee Postsecondary Education Consortium has been coordinating the following activities in collaboration with Gallaudet and NTID/RIT:

- A network of 30 federal officials, researchers, and program administrators from a large variety of postsecondary education and vocational rehabilitation settings were involved in

developing and revising the *Agenda*. During 2000 most of these experts participated in focus group meetings in Los Angeles (January) and Denver (April). Many of them also reviewed successive drafts of the document by e-mail. In conceptualizing the framework for the *Agenda*, it's multiple authors also utilized the findings from significant recent national studies mentioned above.

- Leading national organizations and institutions representing postsecondary, vocational rehabilitation, and research professionals and the deaf and hard of hearing consumers they serve will be asked to endorse the *National Research Agenda* before it is submitted to USDED later in 2001.

Conclusions:

Professionals are aware that during the past 30 years research on the postsecondary training of deaf and hard of hearing students has been generally sporadic and fragmented. Studies have evaluated classroom instruction methods and support service programs at selected colleges and universities. Presentations at conferences sponsored by the Postsecondary Education Consortium, the Association on Higher Education and Disability, the Southeastern Regional Institute on Deafness, and PEPNet generally reflect "best practices" conducted at specific programs. Although these activities have been beneficial in disseminating knowledge of professional services and policies in postsecondary training, there has been little integration of this knowledge across research and demonstration projects.

The *National Research Agenda* is designed as a policy document to enhance planning, coordination, and funding of future research projects on deaf and hard of hearing participants in postsecondary training. These projects are anticipated to examine a wide range of significant issues on the interactions of variations in student characteristics, support services, and campus living and learning environments. It is also anticipated that federal research funds will be better invested and yield a higher impact on postsecondary training.

Importance:

The ultimate objective of the *National Research Agenda* is to use research-generated knowledge to improve practices and policies that will augment and expand opportunities and outcomes for deaf and hard of hearing students in postsecondary training programs.

It is envisioned that this *Agenda* will lead to the creation of well-defined student populations, variables impacting the availability and use of support services or accommodations (including communicative technologies), as well as factors affecting classroom learning and on-campus social life. In addition, another desired product is the development of national standards on the quality of support services.

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